

So You Want to Compose for the Moving Image

by Reynold Weidenaar

Movie music has long been held to be a haven for composers who have little or nothing to say. Facile in a cornucopia of fashionable styles and techniques, film composers supply torrents of notes to satiate the wills and whims of sundry producers, directors, and other media moguls. This is not such a bad thing: composing for hire is one of the world's most ancient and honorable professions. Furthermore, film music frequently does offer room for considerable self-expression, and some scores do become memorable (sometimes to the detriment of the film). The music is likely to be heard widely, which is important to every composer, especially to those who won't admit it. Finally, the bottom line can run anywhere from mediocre (that is to say, not bad at all) up to downright fat and sassy. By far the most attractive feature to a composer is the huge demand for music in the media of the moving image. Possibilities of besting the competition in other avenues range from slim to none. A thousand new pop singles are released each week; only a handful make the charts. On the serious side, two thousand college composition departments throughout the U.S. are turning out hundreds of B.M.'s, B.A.'s, M.A.'s, M.F.A.'s, D.M.A.'s, and Ph.D.'s each year. One or more of these degrees and sixty cents are guaranteed to be worth a cup of coffee. A minuscule number of these graduates move into the coveted teaching posts that free them to devote most of their part time towards establishing national reputations as composers. Most will not.

Americans watch television an average of thirty-four hours a week, and attend the cinema an average of two and a half hours per year. The amount of footage needed to slake their voracious appetite for footage enlists the efforts of an army of composers. This is not a recruiting article, just a compendium of advice and counsel for those who would like to take a peek before they leap.

We begin at the forks in the road, for there are many ways to making nonconventional paths, one of which is establishing your own moving images, as well as going the route of the traditional movie/TV composer. Advice on the former endeavor is based largely on personal experience, from which I will try to generalize wherever possible. After graduating from a music conservatory, I settled down to direct the electronic

music studio of that institution. I had more or less arrived at electronic tape music as a specialization, having earlier worked for several years as a full-time recording engineer. The value of this experience was incalculable, and similar background should be one of the cornerstones of any composer working with recorded media. Although the response to my electronic music was very good, especially to a series of pieces incorporating wretched excess, it became apparent as the seventies wore on that electronic music was not ushering in the New Magnetic Age exactly as predicted. This is probably because most members of an audience find it hard to relate sexually to a big pair of speakers on stage. (This was an actual complaint at a question-and-answer session following a concert in Cleveland.) It became less and less common for tape pieces to be played at new music concerts. I began to look around for other forms and media that could coexist comfortably with electronic music.

Live forms, such as theatre and dance, seemed a good place to begin. They do not require high-cost storage of sounds and images on recording media. They also offer easy and immediate flexibility of timing, which encourages experimentation.

My first choice was modern dance, which I heartily endorse as one of the most colossal dead ends ever to face a young composer (except that it's a great way to meet girls). A composer whose music is used by dance companies will see a dramatic increase in performances of his or her music, sometimes to an order of magnitude. But the impact is negligible. Most reviewers of dance concerts do not have strong music backgrounds, and are wary of commenting outside their own area of expertise. Hence, a composer's finest effort can be used at hundreds of dance performances before there is so much as a single mention of the music in the dance press. Just pick up a copy of *Dance Magazine* and see if, in dozens and dozens of reviews, any opinion is expressed about the music. It does happen, but it's rare. The other problem with dance is that it occupies the bottom of the economic ladder in the arts. Most dancers are paid peanuts, and the composer will not even do as well. Ten or fifteen dollars for a performance license fee is about the most that an unknown composer can get, even from the most prominent dance companies. And be prepared not

to be surprised at how often they will "forget" to report performances of your works.

Despite these caveats, working with dance is an extremely good learning experience. It helps in developing a visual sense, as well as a feeling for theatre, for narrative, and especially for visual rhythm. A composer who can attain a working understanding of these elements may have the potential to make his or her own motion pictures. This is a tough field filled with opportunities. The film programs of colleges across the U.S. graduate 5,000 majors each year, but most don't know nearly enough about sound and music. Composers who become skilled in a unified conception and execution of visuals and sound/music will find places for themselves. There are many interesting and new realizations of the potential of combining music and the moving image, just waiting to be designed. At present the only major director who composes his own music is Satyajit Ray.

Sailing on such uncharted waters, most composers will dredge up some naive notions of what type of visuals rightly go with their music. Typical inaugural inspirations involve some kind of lockstep electronic visualization of the music (my own first step), or perhaps an animated rendering of the score, or maybe even one of those old color-organ theories where hues are derived from pitch intervals. This is not to say that any of these ideas is intrinsically unworkable. It's just that composers' first efforts as movie makers, when they are trying to realize some sort of visual music, tend to be thin, predictable, and one-dimensional. This is all well and good, in fact it's great, as a first step—composers simply need to keep in mind that their initial moving images probably don't represent the ultimate answer in visual-music composition, and so they shouldn't stop learning. A multiplicity of techniques (such as graphic composition, framing, colorizing, image motion, camera movement, editing, etc.) must be mastered to produce good film or video. Even more important than technique are those first fundamental choices of what is happening on the other side of the camera. Subject, content, *mise-en-scène* that is well chosen, well-designed, that people can care about, will elevate a work above any minor technical imperfections. But if such substance is not there, the slickest hi-tech gloss won't hold the audience. At all times, at every choice—during every frame—the key question to bear in mind is, "Why should anyone watch this?" Great music won't save irrelevant pictures.

My first idea for a film was oscilloscope images. Being a complete novice, I enlisted the aid of a filmmaker by providing sound recording services in return. (Another possible barter might be music soundtracks.) If you are able to establish such a partnership with a filmmaker, be sure you have a clear idea of exactly what you want to do. Film stock and processing are expensive, and so are mistakes. You will make a few, but too many could be ruinous.

The next step would be to get experience with a camera, either super-8 film or 1/2-inch video. At this point a few of the numerous how-to-do-it books on film or video production should become required reading.

If your interest survives unabated, this is now the time to get serious and take a good film course. There are many around, and most are semi-worthy to one degree or another. One in particular excels, and even though I work for an institution that offers it, I can recommend it unhesitatingly (people come from all over the world to take this course, and registration closes early): Sight and Sound, known during the Summer term as Beginning Film Production, at New York University. I took the course a few years ago, and it turned out to be crucial to my present

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Night Flame Ritual

by Reynold Weidenaar

This work explores the dynamics of ritual: its rhythms and feelings, and its oscillation between the concrete world and other worlds. It is not designed to depict a literal or narrative ceremony, rather it offers scenes and sounds with fluctuating contrasts and interplay in perspective: movement, texture and representation.

Night Flame Ritual is written for clarinet, pitch transposer, digital delay, color/B&W Video, and electronic sound. It uses 1/2" U-Matic video cassette, stereo soundtrack and lasts 5:22 minutes.

The clarinet uses a Barcus-Berry Pick-up bored into the mouthpiece and sends its live audio signal through a model 129 MXR Pitch Transposer, and a model 151 system 2 MXR Digital Delay.

Image processing uses a Jones voltage-controlled colorizer, /keyer/mixer/raster scan deflector, audio waveform synthesizer, video line converter, Jones colorizer, and Cromemco 2-2 bit computer with eight channels of A-to-D and two CAF-100 frame buffers.

Recorded Audio Processing consists of tape editing and processing, mixing, re-recording, equalization, and digital delay of sounds produced by tap dancing, cowbells, frc, fireworks and clarinet multiphonics.

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